

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 002293

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: ECON NT

SUBJECT: TOURISM IN NIGERIA: FOR THE BIRDS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶1. (SBU) Summary: If a tourist came to Nigeria to look at endangered species (or for any other reason), he or she would be the most endangered species of all. Nigeria has practically no tourist industry, but there is no inherent reason why that should be the case. While we might have doubts about anyone who came to Nigeria for its urban charm, from the standpoint of wildlife there is much to see, and ecotourists needn't fight the crowds. Last week a Lagos officer joined a group traveling around the country to assess the potential for bird and wildlife tourism. The group included the owners of a bird tour company, a producer of wildlife programs for the Discovery channel, and Phil Hall, a long-time naturalist in Nigeria and the country representative of a foundation that has supported wildlife conservation and national park management for many years. A BBC correspondent joined the group at several points and aired several reports on its progress. The group concluded its trip much sobered and discouraged by conditions on the ground. The head of the Nigerian wildlife service met with President Obasanjo October 27 to report on the trip and discuss its implications for the opening of ecotourism in Nigeria; Obasanjo was reportedly taken aback that anyone had evinced interest in Nigeria's national parks, but he agreed to throw some extra resources in their direction. Despite GON efforts, or the lack thereof, a few private initiatives hold promise for creating sites that tourists will actually pay money to visit. End summary.

¶2. (U) From an ecotourism standpoint, Nigeria has one particularly potent draw: picathartes oreas, Africa's most sought after bird. It is rare, unique and on most birders' top 10 list worldwide. It can be seen only on the Nigeria/Cameroon border, but it is apparently present in Gabon. At present all birders who want to see it go to Cameroon, where it is a five-day round trip (once in country) to its nesting sites. The sites in Nigeria are much more accessible (and as an added bonus, Nigeria has forest elephants and mountain gorillas).

¶3. (SBU) The birding tour company was so confident of being able to put together a workable tour centered on picathartes that it has already advertised a tour for next year. The itinerary would include the Cattle Ranch at Obudu, the hill village near the picathartes sites, savannah and riverine environments along the Niger River, Okomu National Park (probably the best remaining rainforest in West Africa) and the Jos Plateau. The organizers, however, began to worry once they saw conditions on the ground. Well-heeled birders are usually not rough and ready young backpackers. They may be prepared for some rough roads, but they typically expect nothing like the road to picathartes, a barely passable clay track featuring bridges with gaping holes. Planks needed to be carefully adjusted so vehicles would not fall into streams. Several weeks' work with a bulldozer in the dry season would take care of much of the problem, but even with improved access, the Cattle Ranch may leave travelers disappointed. Although it is the premier tourist establishment in the east, it has no landline and cannot be reached by e-mail.

¶4. (SBU) The visit to the savannah/riverine environment in Edo State went without incident, but things went downhill at Okomu National Park. The access road was a survival contest with stuck vehicles blocking the way. One of the group's vehicles nearly became mired, and the BBC 4x4 got stuck for two hours. Again, this is nothing a bulldozer couldn't fix if the work were done in the right way at the right time and kept up. The lodge was a shock. Although freshly painted on the outside, it looked derelict inside: shabby walls, peeling linoleum, black mold on the doors and ceilings, and furniture likely banned by some international convention. The potentially picturesque thatched hut built as a dining area needed serious attention and cleaning (termite tubes climbed unintended up wood surfaces to the roof). We were told the national park service is not maintaining the lodge in the hope that the state government will build a new one. The latter is seriously considering doing so, and we sat in on a meeting at the park to work on the proposal. Whether a new lodge would be any better maintained than the existing one is

a real question, but with new facilities, the park could be a gold mine. The group found fresh elephant tracks and saw scores of bird species, many endemics included. Several canopy platforms have been built, and these afford good views of exotic species (reporting officer climbed 130 feet up the side of a tree to reach one, an experience for which he considers the current post differential inadequate).

15. (SBU) The trip back to Lagos on the Benin/Lagos expressway was a complete showstopper. The divided highway is always a horror show; it was no different this time. The organizers concluded they would have to begin the trip somewhere other than Lagos, Calabar perhaps, and cover as much internal distance by air as possible. The cost of air charter in Nigeria is almost completely prohibitive, but staying in the air would minimize the constant problem of shakedowns by police at the country's ubiquitous roadblocks. These are beyond annoying. They can occur every couple of minutes for miles on end, and without diplomatic plates or a willingness to shut up and pay up, every stop can be a problem.

16. (SBU) We asked the tour organizers what the odds might be of Nigeria working up to 500 ecotourists a year (the most popular preserve in Costa Rica, for comparison, gets 100,000 visitors a year, that is the preserve, not the country). The odds aren't good, they said. Too many things need to get fixed and stay fixed, and Nigeria's reputation is working against it. They were not even sure they should run the one trip to which they committed. If the ecology doesn't pull the tourists in, of course, there are always the glamorous casinos of Lagos. We stopped at one near the Consulate recently and found a dozen waiters asleep on the kitchen floor and the croupiers asleep with their heads on the green baize.

17. (U) Comment: Tourism is a sensitive subject here. Nigerians and their supporters believe they get a bad rap internationally and regularly protest that the State Department's travel warnings are inaccurate and unfair. That said, most of our contacts will admit that the birders' experience wasn't exceptional. Nigerians simultaneously boast of wonderful natural sites and bemoan the lack of infrastructure to get there. Even worse, the Miss World fiasco of 2002 was a devastating blow to Nigeria's image for anyone thinking of visiting.

18. (U) Despite the doom and gloom, there is a glimmer of light on the horizon. Travel advertising in the U.S. is increasing in conjunction with the recently established World Airways direct flights from New York and Atlanta to Lagos (although the jury is still out on how successful that effort will be). The indefatigable president of the Africa Tourism Association is a Nigerian, Wanle Akinboboye, who struggles to bring tourists, including a steady trickle of African-American mayors ) to Nigeria and has built an internationally acceptable resort that goes down well with foreign guests. There is also an annual African Heritage Festival, heavily subsidized by the Lagos State government, that might impress the handful of Americans who attend.

19. (U) The just-concluded 8th All Africa Games was the biggest boon to Nigerian tourism since Festac in 1977. According to the Chief Executive of the Nigerian Tourism Association Omotayo Omotosho, between August and mid-October 2003 there were 70,000 visitors associated with the Games, 25,000 of which were considered bona fide tourists who sought information from the National Travel Bureau.

10. (U) For the most part, whatever hope there is for a tourism industry in Nigeria lies with private sector efforts. A few resorts are opening, and hotels are refurbishing with the knowledge that if you don't build it, they won't come. That said, Nigeria's take-off as a travel destination is still a long way off. End comment.

HINSON-JONES